

THE BIG TEXAN.

He was a big Texan in a Texas A-n-M shirt. A patriarch of the family, all of which (in their matching university garments) were outside at the moment, photographing themselves against the cloud-beshrouded summit of Haleakala volcano. I was behind the Visitor Center desk, heater on in the cold air at 10,000 ft. spending my day being informative and helpful.

The Vis. Ctr. holds about 100 people when they're packed in like sardines—which happens on nasty, really bitterly cold days. Today there were 30 or 40 people milling about looking out the window or attempting to make sense of the maps and models.

The Big Texan leaned on the counter, booming his life story at me in a Big Texan Voice. He told me he used to be a barber, then became an electrician, then began to really hate that. When his children were 1 and 4, respectively, he was at his wit's end with his job and desperate to quit. He informed his wife that she could choose whether he blew his brains out or quit, and her advice was to pray and pray, and that God would send a sign.

Well, he prayed and prayed and God, he said, remained mum on the sign. He'd been breeding greyhounds for racing on the side, small-time, and began to wonder if maybe he could do that fulltime. But with two tiny kids to support he was plenty afraid to take a risk, do his own thing. Company life, though miserable, felt safe.

On an impulse he went to the racetracks in Florida with a friend and talked to Those In The Know about raising racing dogs. All the feedback was good. On the flight back to Texas he was stewing in a quandary, now knowing that he could make a go of dog breeding but still afraid to risk it, go his own way.

At that moment, as fate would have it, the pilot came on and announced the usual pilot things, then put some music out over the plane speakers (strange, I know, but I'm just telling you what he told me). As the Big Texan sat there contemplating the choices before him, the song on the airplane turned out to be none other than Sinatra's "My Way." The Texan said the tingles began at his toes and went to the crown of his head, and he turned to his friend and announced that God had indeed, after many months' delinquency, given him a sign.

And thus it came to pass that he became a wildly rich greyhound racing dog breeder in Texas.

Now, up until this point I was nodding and smiling, ringing up the odd geology or myth book, and generally sort of half-listening. Until the Big Texan, in that Big Voice, proceeded to inform me that he'd:

PIONEERED THAT FROZEN SEMEN, YESSIR. AMAZING HOW FAST I CAN GET SEMEN FROM ONE OF MY CHAMPIONS TO A READY BITCH, WHAT WITH FEDEX AND ALL NOWADAYS. YOU GOT A BITCH IN HEAT, I CAN GET THAT SEMEN TO YOUR VET WITHIN 24 HOURS, INSEMINATE HER RIGHT AWAY. WE DO IT ALL WITH ENDOSCOPES NOW, THE BREEDING. JUST GET IN THERE WITH A BIG OL' SRYINGE, LIKE A TURKEY BASTER, YEP, I RUN THE LARGEST FROZEN SEMEN OPERATION IN THE STATE AND THIRD LARGEST IN THE COUNTRY...

There was more, actually, but I was busy freezing to the spot, caught in a feeling I haven't had since I was a bartender years ago, when drunk people would blearily bellow out the most private things and I would have to stand there behind the bar nodding, nowhere to hide, no shovel to dig through the floor with.

The rest of the visitors in the Center had gone so quiet you could hear the air molecules hum. The words SEMEN and BITCH IN HEAT, and to a lesser degree TURKEY BASTER and FEDEX seemed to be bouncing around the room, clanking off the walls like demon-possessed Frisbees of sonic iron. I dared not look behind me, and instead remained rooted to the spot, nodding pointlessly, apparently agreeing that insemination had indeed undergone a wondrous metamorphosis, as techniques go. The seconds dragged by like something large and limp towed behind a camel over a giant dune of dust. Agony.

The Big Texan ran out of conversational speed very suddenly, being called out to help fill the family photo quota. The room gradually filled with air again.

That prankster God. Sinatra. You'd think the signs would come through Elvis or Aretha. I wonder what Ol' Blue Eyes would make of his role in this tale. He'd need a martini, I think, and so did I. Extra dry.